

In Conversation with Zhang Zhenlin

Interview by Amy Weng for Sothu

Amy: When did you really decide you wanted to make art?

Zhenlin: It started around high school. Earlier than that, when I was very young, it was just an interest. Later I wanted to study art systematically, but I didn't think about becoming an artist yet. By high school, I felt I wanted to express something of my own. So I came to England, took a foundation course, and afterwards went on to do my master's.

The master's was in oil painting. During my undergraduate studies, the influence on me was significant. I already had a foundation in painting techniques, and the program pushed me to expand my thinking and find a more independent way of expressing myself. My tutors encouraged me to loosen up and search for what I actually wanted to say. By the time I reached postgraduate level, I had matured. I started producing work in series, and that practice has carried on ever since.

People today like to call this kind of work "healing." But I don't think it's only about healing. It's the artist's perspective: the things they've seen and learned, presented to the world from another angle. Sometimes it's a historical layer, sometimes it's about the social context of a particular moment. These things have shaped me, and they show up in my work.

Amy: You mentioned wanting self-expression by high school. What did you feel was missing in the work you'd been making until then?

Zhenlin: Yes. I wanted to express things from very early on. The first kind of art I encountered was what we called children's painting: very free, very imaginative. A lot of it came from animations or things I'd seen as a child, and I wanted to put those out into the world. Later that felt too one-dimensional, so I moved into what we call black-and-white relations: tonal drawing, closer to Russian realism, classical art. I wanted to study that more deeply.

But once I'd learned it, I realised I couldn't simply place my work into that tradition the way I'd imagined. Realist work is too tied to the things of daily life. Too grey. Too direct. I don't find that especially artistic. For me, art needs something underneath it, something carrying it: a metaphor, another layer, a spiritual dimension, or even just colour. When I was an undergraduate, I was taught that black and white stand for death, that red stands for anger. Each colour carries its own context and its own environment.

If you want pure realism, film and the camera have already replaced that. What they can't replace is the emotion in colour. Film reflects the contradictions and statements of real life, but painting is built on top of that, a more complex way of expressing feeling. It contains errors, uncertainties. Colour is delicate: it shifts with materials, weather, humidity. And the human eye

perceives it through three types of cone cells, though some people have four, and some are colour-blind or colour-weak. So a painting can look completely different from one viewer to another. We're told it's green, but what actually reaches the eye varies. That's what makes painting so singular.

Amy: For you, which part of art matters most? You've talked about colour, history, emotion, spirituality. What feels most important?

Zhenlin: First, the historical dimension. Second, colour. And along with that, an understanding of each thing, each subject. In my work, certain animals appear: cranes, deer, mythological creatures, flowers. I think every person carries their own reading of these animals, shaped by their inner life or their experience. We don't see them purely as biology. We see them as a deeper figure, a metaphor.

Take the swan: at first glance we read it as noble. The horse: difficult to break and train. The tiger: a symbol of strength. Every creature has its own particular quality, one that's collectively recognised. That recognition is what makes them work in a painting. At the same time, their natural colours are part of how they exist in the world, and those colours shift under different light. A tiger might be white, biologically because of albinism or some kind of selective trait, but in the artistic treatment that whiteness can call up other meanings entirely. That's the kind of emotional expression I'm reaching for.

Amy: The next question is a Joker: you can bring in your own topic, or tell me what you'd like to be asked. Maybe something you've been thinking about recently, or something nobody has ever asked you.

Zhenlin: What I'd actually like to be asked is whether the Han people are a minority or a majority. Or whether the Han we know today is still the Han we think it is. Whether it has its own particular artistic form, or whether it doesn't, and what we recognise instead are things like the *fu* character or the four treasures of the study, those traditional symbols that stand in for "China." That's what I want to talk about.

Amy: Let's talk about it.

Zhenlin: From what I've understood, the word "Han" originally comes from the Qin dynasty. Back then, "Han" didn't refer to people. It referred to a body of water, the Han River. Later, when Liu Bang overthrew the Qin and the Han dynasty began, the people living on that land came to be called Han. From a European angle, the continuity is supposed to run from that period straight through to today. Europe and Japan tend to think the link has to be biological: bloodline, genetics, an unbroken chain.

But across history, people migrate, people intermarry. Especially in the Song and Ming periods: many ancestors of what later became the Manchu and other minority groups learned the Han

language, studied Han culture and Confucian thought, and called themselves Han. That has carried through to the present. The clan system and the imperial examination system are part of why this continuity persists.

Strictly speaking, the biological tie people imagine doesn't really exist. After more than two thousand years it's almost impossible to verify. People kept moving. So in the later sense, being Han is more about culture, about taking on the Confucian framework. Anyone who studies that culture can call themselves Han. It isn't tied to a fixed region or a specific background, and it doesn't require an unbroken two-thousand-year line.

Amy: Could you connect this to your work?

Zhenlin: This was the question I started from. And what I came to see is that, with two thousand years of transmission, the truly pure artistic elements have been worn down. Or rather, fused. There's a great deal of cultural mixing in there. It isn't limited to "Han" as a single artistic form. There's a lot of minority influence, and a lot from outside as well.

In my own work, the references aren't only Han. There's Tibetan material, and there are fragments from European contexts too. I don't see this as a problem. It enriches the work. It also lets me show, more honestly, my own picture of the world. The transmission of Han art was never a single-people phenomenon. It was always a multi-ethnic form of expression.

What I want viewers to see, though, is something specific to the Han aesthetic from two to three thousand years ago. Something more abstract. Not the way we now think, which has been shaped by Soviet and figurative-realist traditions, but a more abstract sensibility, closer to deities, closer to dream-states. Something like the Chinese dreamscape: *Nanke yi meng* (Dream of the Southern Bough), *Zhuang Zhou meng die* (Zhuang Zhou dreaming of the butterfly). That kind of mythic resonance. It can't be pinned down in language. It's wide open. You reach it through lived experience, through a particular kind of state, looking at yourself from the third person. I'm trying to render that in a way that sits between abstract and figurative. That's the approach in the work.

Amy: Last question. If you had a whole year to live a completely different life, not the you of now, not making art, what kind of life would you want to try?

Zhenlin: Two answers, really. The first: I'd want to be someone who looks for the interesting things in the world. A bit like a gem hunter. Searching for minerals, finding different beautiful stones, learning the local cultures around them, understanding their myths.

The second: I'd want to be someone who doesn't need much thought at all. A kind of artisan. Doing one thing, clumsily. No clever technique required. Not pushing to express themselves, not deliberately performing self-expression. Just doing the simplest possible thing. A monk sweeping

the floor. A Daoist chanting. Doing it for its own sake, not for anything outside, not in order to change themselves into something.

Amy: Thank you.